

MAKING MEANINGS

First Thoughts

1. Review the notes you made as you read "Go Down, Death." Which words, lines, or stanzas had the strongest effect on you? Why?



Shaping Interpretations

2. Identify where God is in stanza 2, and where Death is in stanza 3. According to stanza 5, where is Sister Caroline? How does Sister Caroline respond to Death's arrival in stanza 7?
3. Find three **similes** that help to suggest the magnificence of the workings of heaven.
4. Does the speaker portray God and Jesus as distant, forbidding figures, or as familiar, gentle ones? Point out at least four **details** that support your interpretation.
5. Why do you think Death rides a "pale, white horse"? Where else have you seen the color white used in a similar **symbolic** way?

Extending the Text

6. While many of the traditional representations of death are fearful, the one in this poem is not. Discuss the ways Johnson **personifies** death in this poem. Then compare Johnson's image with images you have encountered in literature (see especially Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" on page 391) or on film.

ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE

Free Verse and the Orator's Style

When Johnson was working on the poems that would eventually become *God's Trombones*, he talked with the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906).

I showed Paul the things I had done under the sudden influence of Whitman. He read them through and, looking at me with a queer smile, said, "I don't like them, and I don't see what you are driving at." He may have been

justified, but I was taken aback. I got out my copy of *Leaves of Grass* and read him some of the things I admired most. There was, at least, some personal consolation in the fact that his verdict was the same on Whitman himself.

—James Weldon Johnson

Examine "Go Down, Death," and see if you can identify the influence of Whitman (page 348). Look for these elements of Whitman's style: (1) **repetition** and **parallel structure** to create rhythm; (2) the simple language of everyday conversation, including slang; (3) variation of line length, from very long to very short, to create a rolling **cadence**; (4) other **sound effects**.

CHOICES: Building Your Portfolio



Writer's Notebook

1. Collecting Ideas for an Interpretive Essay



Explore the similarities and differences in the attitudes toward death in Johnson's "Go Down, Death" and Gwendolyn Brooks's "of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery" (see *Connections* on page 741). Take notes in a double-column comparison-contrast chart. Save your notes for possible use in the Writer's Workshop on page 804.

Comparing Sermons

2. Sermons Side by Side

Extracts from another famous sermon in American literature are on page 79—Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In a brief essay, compare and contrast Johnson's sermon with Edwards's. Consider these elements of each sermon: (a) imagery, (b) figures of speech, (c) message, (d) tone, (e) audience, and (f) purpose.